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Breeding the Lady Gould

by Herschel Frey
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



Herschel Frey
AFA State Coordinator, Pa.

The striking Gouldian Finch (*Chloebea gouldiae*), which the Australian finch authority, Klaus Immelmann, called "the most beautiful and most interesting [of the group]" (*Australian Finches in Bush and Aviary*, 1965), is likely also the most controversial finch from that country in American aviculture. For one reason or another, fanciers have such different experiences with the bird that, regrettably I feel, some finch enthusiasts have been reluctant to try their hands at this beauty.

What I propose to do here is not to repeat what has already been written about the Lady Gould, but instead to limit my points in an attempt to reconcile some of the important contradictory notions on this finch and also to share with the reader a number of my own observations based on extensive experience with Goulds. While no two Gould breeders will have identical

experiences, there are factors, I think, that account for the apparent confusions and lack of agreement among breeders. I am just as convinced that regardless of such variables as stock, locale, housing, feeding, temperature, and the like — one can determine and count on certain general patterns of behavior. While the Lady Gould is more of a challenge than the Zebra or the Society, I would stress that even the novice breeder, following the best available advice, can breed this finch successfully and consistently. There will be disappointments, as there are in breeding any bird, but I could draw up a list of beginning breeders whose success has easily outweighed their failures.

The fancier new to the Gould is often unclear as to what to expect when pairing two birds of different head colors. Most people have initial experiences with either the red-headed or the black-headed variety, the two most common color types. It is often incorrectly assumed that if you breed a red-headed bird to a black-headed one, the offspring won't be "pure," distinctly one or the other. This assumption is sometimes based no doubt on the fact that a minority of red hens actually show more black facial coloring than red, even though genetically they are pure reds. (The red-headed males show no such variation in the amount of red in the head.) The reds and the blacks, are, then, always separate types and breed true. Redheadedness is sex-linked and dominant to the black. Thus, a red-headed female is always a pure red, whereas a red-headed male can be pure red (with two factors for redheadedness) or else split-to-black (one factor for red, one for black) — this latter single factor occurs when either parent is a black-headed bird. On average these are the offspring expectations for the various pairings:

1. Black \times black = all black offspring.
2. Red \times red = all red.
3. Red (pure) male \times black female = 50 percent red males split-to-black; 50 percent red females.
4. Black male \times red female = 50 percent red males split-to-black; 50 percent black females.
5. Red (split-to-black) male \times red female = 25 percent black females; the rest, reds.
6. Red (split-to-black) male \times black female = 25 percent of each; red males, black males, red females, black females.

A less common coloration is the so-called yellow-headed variety; the head color is actually a light orange, not at all the bright yellow of the belly area. Genetically this yellow bird is either a red-headed or a black-headed specimen that is unable to convert the yellow carotinoids into red ones. Since this trait is recessive, both birds of a pair must carry the factor in order for it to show up in the offspring. Whether or not the "yellow" color is overt, or hidden in a split bird, depends of course on parentage.

Two similar recessive mutations that are more recent on the American finch scene are the stunning white-breasted and the blue-breasted Goulds. In the white-breasted bird all of the normal remain the same, except for the breast, which is a striking snow white instead of the usual purple. Personally I prefer the white breast in combination with the black head, but since beauty is in the eye of the beholder, others prefer the combination of white breast and red head. In both types, the white of the breast tones down the bird, that to the taste of some beholders is a bit too garish or royal in coloration, especially in the vivid red and purple combination. The same might be said of the more recent blue-breasted mutation. The blue (a deep powder blue) and red pattern is quite pleasant; changes in this variety also include a gray rump area, with no blue or green feathers, and a chartreuse suffusion extending down the back of the head. Otherwise, in any head color variety, the colors elsewhere remain those of the normal bird.

The white-breasted Gould has been bred in England for some years now; the bird took its good time "migrating" to our shores. The British breed a white-breasted (of either sex; remember, it's recessive) to a split bird, to yield 50 percent whites and 50 percent splits. Evidently, even though a lot of outcrossing has strengthened this mutation, white to white produces a smaller, less vigorous bird. I have not tried white to white, though the offspring of my white to split pairings have been large, strong birds. The blue-breasted mutation cropped up several years ago in this country and a few breeders are currently at work establishing it. Other mutations, such as lutino, albino, blue-backed, etc., have appeared in Australia and elsewhere, but these seem to hold less interest for breeders or else have not been firmly established.

As regards the breeding of Goulds, I



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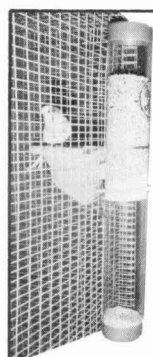
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will focus on these areas: temperature and light, housing, diet, pairing, the nest, fostering.

The Gouldian inhabits only the northern tropical zone of Australia. Somewhat before and during the breeding season (January to April, according to Immelmann) it journeys a bit southward, following the heat and the middle and end of the rainy season, which brings abundant seeding grasses and insects, both of which it feeds its young. In the wild the Gould apparently relishes sunlight and heat. The Gould alone among the finches of Australia has been observed taking extended sunbaths in temperatures exceeding 100°. Thus it is easy to accept the conviction of some breeders that high temperatures, when the birds are at nest, of at least 80°, if not essential, are most desirable. Many of these same people also insist that relatively high temperatures, say in the 72-76° range, are necessary for the 4-6 month-old that is going through its critical first moult. But some Sunbelt breeders who use outside aviaries point to their success with lower temperatures, or at least more varying temperatures, which can drop into the thirties. They claim hardier birds, not the "hothouse" variety pampered in controlled indoor environments. I'm sure there is some truth in this "survival of the fittest" theory. On the other hand, my experience indicates that a healthy Eastern Gould, raised in perhaps higher, controlled temperatures, transplants well as long as it is allowed to adapt slowly to another, even outdoor, climate. For those breeders for whom the mixed blessings of outdoor aviaries are unavailable, I recommend a temperature range of 65-70° to 80°, with the highest point reached during the 5-6 month breeding period. One is of course free to choose any block of months out of the year for the induced breeding season. Thereafter I feel the temperature should be lowered gradually, so that the moulting adults and young have at least a 70° environment in which to endure their quite severe moult. (The Gould goes through a heavier moult than one would think it could or should.)

Along with relatively high temperatures during the breeding months, I also recommend high humidity (60-75 percent) and at least 14 hours light. After breeding ceases, the number of light hours can be gradually reduced to 10 or so. A moulting Gould tucks his head and sleeps a lot, even during the day, which would indicate some needed extra rest. Many bird folk now insist on the effectiveness of vita light and its superiority over other ordinary fluorescent bulbs. I am unaware of the existence of any research evidence to support this

claim, and I do not myself use them. But it might be proved one day that these lights warrant the added expense.

One of the most frequent questions asked of me by people who acquire my Goulds concerns housing. I have bred them in cages and flights of all shapes and sizes. My preference runs toward individual breeding cages, say, 28" long, 24" high and 24" deep, with the nest box, a 5½" cube with a 1¾" or larger hole at the top and off to one side. I provide three perches of different diameters. Any dried straw will do for nesting material, though Goulds prefer rather thin, pliable straw. I favor cage breeding over colony breeding because the birds are less likely to be interfered with and seem generally to pay better attention to the job of rearing their young. In a smallish cage they are all but forced to focus on the nest and must constantly confront the fledged babies. And of course with cage breeding one can control records. I would add that prior to the breeding season both males and females, but especially the latter, need space to fly and come into condition through sufficient exercise.

A lot has been written about appropriate diet for the Gould. Immelmann and others stress high protein content and minerals. Some Goulds will eat mealworms, at least the small ones, especially if taught to do so by other birds. But I would say that this is the exception rather than the rule. It seems strange even to experienced Gould breeders that they consume quantities of flying termites and probably other insects in the wild, while showing little interest in any insects offered in captivity. They do relish most any seed on the stalk, including spray millet and seeding grasses in the milk stage. (As a special treat I grow them some Johnson Grass seed which I get from my native Texas.) But these foods are not essential to their diet. A good fresh, fertile finch mix (my recipe: 2 parts canary, 1 part white proso millet, 1 part large red millet, 2 parts small panicum millet) is the core to any successful diet. I feed this fresh daily and also in sprouted form. My method for sprouting is to soak for 12 hours, beginning in the a.m., rinse thoroughly, let drain in a strainer over night, then cover in a plastic bag the next day and night (i.e., 24 hours), then feed the next morning. At this point the seed, including the slow-sprouting canary, has germinated just enough for the Goulds to relish it. They seem not to care for it as much if the roots have grown out a lot. Some if not most Goulds with young consume a goodly amount of sprouted seed. I also give them romaine or spinach, moistened whole wheat bread, plenty of grit, including egg

shell and cuttle bone, and egg food when they have young or are moulting. I use Avitron or another good water-soluble multivitamin. Young fledged birds, and some adults, eat hulled millet (available at most health food stores into which has been blended the yolk of a raw egg; portions: 1 cup millet to 1 egg yolk. Spread this rather sticky mixture and let it dry, then crumble into individual seeds. It will keep for several weeks unrefrigerated and I find that it encourages the fledglings to eat a bit earlier on their own, since they don't have to crack the seed. Most Society Finches used as foster parents like this coated millet too and some feed it in great amounts. I should add that I feed my fostering Societies the same diet as the above, except for added mealworms and different basic seed mix: 2 parts large millet to 1 part canary. Oat groats and hulled, chopped sunflower can be added if they will eat them.

Whenever possible one should allow Goulds to pair off naturally instead of arbitrarily catching up a male and female and placing them together. The problem with this strategy is that if you have a lot of related birds, too often, or so it seems, a sister will fall for her brother, and such a pairing is mostly to be avoided. If you are fortunate enough to have even as many as six unrelated breeding-age birds, you can put them in one large flight, if you intend to colony breed, or else separate the cocks from the hens in adjacent cages and wait for them to pair off. (Put different colored bands on each if you cannot recognize them individually.) I keep my males and females separated into walk-in flights during the off-season, and quite often as the breeding time approaches some will pair off across the dividing wire (I even provide a side-by-side "courting platform"). I have found that while Goulds are generally rather promiscuous, forming nowhere near the kind of enduring bond found, for example, in budgies, on occasion two Goulds will become exceedingly fond of one another and such a self-selected pair will more often than not make an excellent breeding combination, with high fertility, tight egg brooding, dependable chick feeding. It is, by the way, easy to spot two birds that have taken to one another; the ritualistic behavior includes tail-twitching, beak-wiping (especially by the male), singing (the male) — and the two try to stay near one another.

I am a big believer in nest watching. Not snooping or meddling, but careful, selective observing. While the Diamond Sparrow, to single out but one shy breeder, might not tolerate a stranger poking around his nest, the Gould has a high de-

gree of tolerance for his intruding keeper. I know for a fact that through the years my watchful eye has caught many a problem in the making, or already made, which I was able to solve, and that left unaided would have come to a bad end. Specifically I have saved many fertile eggs and imperiled chicks that otherwise would have become losses. Some female Goulds will consistently lay full fertile clutches but refuse to incubate (perhaps 1 out of 8). Of course, if you regularly use Societies as foster birds this will not be a problem; indeed, once you harvest the clutch, the neglectful hen can be on her way to laying another and then another batch of eggs. But if you have several pairs of Goulds set up and you insist that they rear their own young, you can often farm out these deserted eggs to other brooding hens. Don't be fearful that your Goulds will abandon the nest if you decide you have to inspect it daily, or until you solve a problem. I have yet to have this happen. Whenever possible I force the male out of the nest box, not the hen, and she usually will quickly return to the nest once you have it back in place.

But there are other nest box problems than a non-sitter. I have had Goulds lay up to 24 eggs nonstop; I can remember more than several clutches of from 12 to 16 eggs (6 is average, 4 or fewer is rare). Since fortunately Goulds (at least the hens) don't begin to incubate a clutch until usually the next-to-last egg has been laid, if you notice that the female has laid 8 eggs or so and still looks heavy with egg (the vent area drops considerably from the normal position and usually the wings are slightly lowered, along with the tail, that can be seen to bob up and down, more than normally, as the bird breathes), you can remove all or some of the first of this clutch (the first-laid eggs will have larger air pockets than the freshest one) and allow the hen to continue to lay until she is done. If you decide to remove all of these first eggs and get them incubated, I would suggest that you place 4 infertile dummy Gould or Society eggs in the nest. Then when this hen has decided that enough is enough, remove only the false eggs, leaving her with her own. You may want to return some (the fertile ones) of her first eggs to her. In any event, you should let her have only as many eggs as she can cover well — usually no more than 7, depending on the size of the eggs. It is obvious, I think, that if you choose to do nothing about this occasional overflow of eggs, you run the risk of producing nothing out of too much, since each of the eggs will likely find itself out from the under the sitting hen for too long an interval.

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Another problem with eggs is that some Gouldians allow them to get buried in the straw. This is not exactly the same problem, though the end result is the same, as the Zebra Finch, who is notorious for covering its eggs with nesting material, only to proceed to the next clutch, thereby producing an egg sandwich. I have been unable to determine whether this coverup job is mostly or solely the doing of the hen or the male, though I suspect the latter. Sometimes a simple nest cleaning will solve the problem and thereafter both birds will sit on totally exposed eggs; but do not be surprised if you find buried eggs with each inspection. This is when a foster Society or another sitting Gould comes in handy.

A more basic reason for keeping a watchful eye on the nest box is to insure that a well-formed nest has been made, a nice small cup with a firm straw bottom to hold the eggs in full view. Some Goulds are terrific nest builders. A few males will continue to carry straw into the box after all the eggs have been laid and he and the hen, alternating nest duty during the day, are incubating steadily, but somehow they manage to maintain a perfectly formed nest. In general I have found that a lot of nest box activity is a good indication of fertile eggs (Goulds mate inside the nest), but as often as not they will accept your own handiwork, adding little if any material of their own. Be on the lookout for troublesome non-nest material — hunks of bread, huge pieces of paper, whole lettuce leaves — and continue to remove these until the male desists. You might want to try something other than paper (sand, wood shavings) on the cage floor if a particular male continues to drag too much torn paper into the nest.

Another reason to inspect the nest is to check for fertility. Though even when a clutch is infertile I allow the hen to sit her 13 days. I find that she is more likely to lay a subsequent full and fertile clutch if she isn't rushed into it.

Once the eggs are due to hatch one has an even more compelling reason to check on the contents of the nest. If you calculate from day one, with the hen sitting that first night, and count the following day (i.e., day two) as the first day, the first chick will ordinarily hatch during the 14th day. In other words, it rarely takes fewer than 13 full days of incubation before the first chick emerges, and sometimes 14 days. Some breeders sprinkle the eggs with warm water a day or so before the eggs are due to hatch, but I have not found this to be at all necessary, perhaps because the humidity remains at a high level in my bird room.

If I can determine that a chick has hatched in the morning and still hasn't been fed by that evening, I step in and lend a helping hand. Fortunately Gould babies have large gaping mouths and are easy to hand-feed. I take a large mealworm, pinch off the head and extract the yellowish innards, which I take up in the end of a toothpick and place into the begging bird. Allow the baby to completely swallow this first bite before you offer a second and third. Since the crop is mostly translucent you can readily see how much has been ingested. I often find that this day-one feeding keeps the youngster strong enough so that the parents, who usually are virgin breeders, catch on to their duty the next day and begin to feed. I have also used egg food and other recipes for this emergency feeding, but I have had the most success with the mealworm. My experience in feeding older Goulds, either before, on, or after fledging has been almost wholly negative. Other Gould breeders echo similar results. Once a chick starts going downhill it all but refuses to be fed, at least by human hands, and stubbornly maintains a clamped-shut beak, and you all but have to man-handle it to beak- or crop-feed it, usually to no avail. Especially some Society fosters will fail to continue to feed the young until they are fully weaned; the problem is less common when the Goulds themselves are the parents.

Lastly, a word about fosterings. Some breeders refuse to use Society Finches or other foster birds, mainly because they fear that the total breeding instinct will be bred out of the birds. I know of no evidence to support this contention. Though I rarely use Societies, for years I kept tabs in the breeding results obtained from my fostered and non-fostered birds and I could see little if any difference. Admittedly, this was over only several generations. Overall, one is to produce more young per pair using Societies where and when needed, but the necessity of double cages (one set for the layers, a second for the feeders) is or can be a major consideration.

Let me close by saying that how many successes and how many failures you will have in breeding the Lady Gould will depend basically on these factors: 1) your motivation and commitment to the endeavor, 2) your ability to consistently carry out a sound approach, 3) the quality and perhaps the number of birds you are working with, and 4) your knack for being able to make good decisions and adjustments at the right time. Don't pay ten dollars less for a bird you even suspect might be inferior to a costlier one and don't buy the cheapest seed you can find. And leave as little to Lady Luck as you can ●

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Lavender Finch (*Estrilda caerulescens*) Central Africa



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